Episode 082 – The Complexity of Chaos and Creativity
An Interview with Jon Kolko

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[00:00] Commercial about The Ninth International Conference on Complex Systems hosted by the New England Complex Systems Institute

[Intro Music]

[2:32] Haley: Today in the Human Current, we have with us Jon Kolko, who's a designer, an educator. We first talked with Jon in 2016 and we discussed complexity, design, and problem solving. We're very excited to have him back on the show. Hi Jon, thanks for being on the Human Current.

[02:46] Jon: Thanks so much for having me back, I appreciate it.

[02:49] Haley: It's a privilege to have you back on the show, a fellow Austinite. So, please introduce yourself to our listeners along with telling us about the work you're currently doing and what makes you passionate?

[02:59] Jon: Sure, well thanks again for having me. My name is Jon and I'm a partner at Modernist Studio, this is a strategy agency that we formed here in Austin about a year ago where we focus on driving design strategies, sometimes called design thinking and then tactical execution for large corporate clients where we solve complex problems and drive the ideas of creativity that are in that book that I think we're going to spend some time talking about today. Through their organizations. I'm also the founder of Austin Center for Design, which is an educational institution here in Austin that teaches interaction design and social entrepreneurship and I continued to teach there and I wrote a new book called, Creative Clarity and the book is a little bit about what I alluded to that modernist does, it's about helping large corporations understand what creativity is and how to bring it inside of their confines and then how to manage it so that it doesn't spiral out of control and the book delves into some tactical topics about what individual managers or practitioners can actually do to help foster creativity in their teams and so as we dive into some of that I think we'll get into some of the topics like critique and the idea of vision and framing and things like that through some of the future questions.

In terms of what I'm passionate about, what makes me excited and most recently I've been thinking a lot about the ideas of what a craft means in the context of strategy. I think many designers think a lot about craft in execution when they make things, when you make artifacts whether they're physical artifacts like chairs and tables or digital artifacts like mobile phone apps or websites and there's a level of sort of cleanliness to the things we make but craft means
something in strategy as well. So, I've been playing around with what those ideas mean because I think when you start to bring creativity inside of an organization, increasingly the people you bring in are being asked to wear both practitioner hats, tactical hats but also a strategic lens on the work that they're doing and so being able to drive that precisely and with a sense of rigor becomes really really important.

[04:58] Haley: Great thank you for sharing a little bit more about your background. When we spoke to you last in 2016, you were working as the VP of design at Blackboard, which is the leading education software company and you had founded originally My Edu and it had been acquired by Blackboard so I know that you were definitely in a creative lead position at that job and it seems like all of your projects now are really based around this idea of what creative work really looks like so it's really inspiring and you have so much experience to fairly back up what you're talking about.

[05:33] Jon: Well thank you, just a point of clarification I didn't found My Edu, I was just an employee there. I was the VP of Design and focused on product innovation and so I got to interact with a lot of the people that were some of the original sort of brain trust of that and then when we got acquired by Blackboard I was able to apply some of the mentality and style of that was in place at that startup that sort of lean in a lose, move quickly attitude and try to bring some of that to a larger corporation. I have had a number of different diverse experiences that I think you know in retrospect were all purposeful and really well designed and planned but obviously in the moment you know your career path is very haphazard but when I look back at it I have had a chance to play an interesting and sometimes influential role in the idea of creativity in organizations.

[06:20] Haley: Great, yeah thank you for clarifying your role and My Edu. It's also just really inspiring how that project led you into you know the path in your career and really focusing on humanizing education software. So, we do want to dive a little bit more into your book which was recently released called, Creative Clarity, a Practical Guide for bringing Creative Thinking into your Company. We'd like to know just why you wrote it maybe a little more about it and who should be reading it?

[06:46] Jon: So, the motivation for writing this was actually based on observing in my clients over and over a very similar behavior and to contextualize this a little bit these clients are Fortune 50 or Fortune 100, very large organizations that have been gravitating toward any of the buzzwords de-jour, so things like innovation and design thinking and even things like lean and agile, they're sort of grasping at straws to try to understand how to behave in a new digital environment where things like existing business practices around quality and conservative thinking don't necessarily play a role anymore and as I watch these companies struggle with how to integrate some of these buzzwords in a meaningful way, I realized that they actually have no idea what it means to have a creative culture and for all of the conversations and articles and things that you find on the Big Fast Company and Ink magazine and Forbes that are all like, here's ten ways stand still creativity in your organization, here's fifteen of these and
twelve of those. There's sort of a lack of depth to the thinking around what it means to have a
creative company and so my motivation to right this was actually a little bit to help me
understand what I was observing. Often when I write it's to help me make sense of the world
around me and then a little bit to try to create something that's useful to people who are in roles
where they're now being tasked with bringing that creativity into their companies and then
maybe sort of looking around going, I really don't know what to do and then I'm sort of stuck in a
place where the expectations are overwhelming and confusing.

I see that in what I think is the target audience for this book, which is people in a bitter upper
level leadership role who are given budgets and mandates to go be more creative or build a
design team from zero to two hundred or work faster and all of these are obviously things we
hear all about and I also think it's valuable for individual practitioners who are driving through
their career path toward like a creative director role where they may be the ones that are
actually managing the creativity on a day to day basis, those are the primary audiences for
Creative Clarity.

[08:64] Haley: I definitely encourage our listeners to grab a copy, it's really great. I mean the
title is Creative Clarity, but you really do demonstrate clarity in what you're talking about and I
love that you described writing the book to learn more about it. I think that that really helps to
bring readers along in the journey because you bring them with you in that learning. It's
definitely something that companies, leaders and company culture is definitely one of those
buzzword topics, but it is so complex when you talk about culture and what it means to actually
change human behavior. So, it's great to have some really tactical ways of approaching it and
thinking about it. Where could our listeners grab a copy of your book?

[09:27] Jon: So, this book we self-published. I've had a number of books, some of which were
with big publishers, some of which we self-published. I self- published this one along with some
colleagues and it's available on Amazon both as a Kindle ebook as well as a print copy and it's
interesting to see the self-promotion cycle, this is an aside I suppose as compared to big
publishers cycle so I've published with Harvard as well as Oxford and then now by myself and to
sort of watch the dynamic of these things change their sort of a grassroots style absorption of
content like this as compared to sort of that top down view of large companies saying, I should
buy this because it was in a magazine I trust and so I'm hoping that maybe some of the listeners
here are looking for something less sterilized and more raw in their reading.

[10:10] Haley: Great, I'm glad you brought that up and you've had some other books that really
speak to this topic as well, kind of in a different light. Your book, *Well Designed* we talked about
in our last episode and so I'm curious to see the differences of how the books do based on their
publishing and hopefully our listeners do take that into consideration. So, Jon I'm wanting to go
more in depth with your book in chapter one, you explain the process of framing and reframing
problems and you describe the role of boundaries and constraints in this process. Would you
share more about this process and explain how it allows for a creative strategy to emerge?
Jon: Yeah, sure I think one of the things that designers learnt a lot of is the idea of constraints and those can be juxtaposed with the idea of requirements for many designers when they hear requirements, they here an arduous thirty or forty page document with things that were written by somebody who doesn't understand people and is only focused on bottom line and there's all sorts of whining that goes on when people absorb a requirements document. As compared to constraints which are freeing and it's not just a nomenclature change, requirements are often mandated top down of before the actual creative exploration has happened and so these may come from somebody who's looked externally at the market and identified a set of capabilities or features that will help them position a product or a business in a particular way in the market or these may be things that are emerging from technical constraints or technical enablers. But a constraint emerges actually from the creative exploration itself, what I mean by that is if a designer is working through a problem and they get to a place of insight where sort of a light bulb goes off, they may now have derived a series of constraints that can then help them move forward in their creative exploration. And this seems a little bit sort of high level magic until you realize that when people are designing things they don't have to be designers to do this. Anybody who is creative does this, they're literally making things up that didn't exist before and so when you say, well what should I make, you have a blank canvas and so you need some sort of containment around that container in which to guide that exploration. And so, these constraints become a freeing way for creative people to start to explore without having rules mandated at them, without having an autocratic perspective on it should do this this and this and it should be like this this and this. Framing then is the way in which the problem is structured and presented and the way those constraints start to manifest as an opportunity statement and what that might look like is a very pragmatic approach versus a very broad approach and we're working with the banking company right now and a couple ways to frame a problem, one might be you are designing a new way to handle online bill pay and so that's a very sort of specific pragmatic approach to product framing. Another might be you are designing a way for people to feel more in tune with the way they manage their money and that's a much more experiential or emotional way of framing the problem. Both are correct, obviously both have room in a business or a problem but they're going to lead to very, very different problems solutions and different ways of thinking about the opportunity and different constraint development and so what I or my designers to do when I'm managing people is to be very overt with the what the problem frame is that they're pursuing, so that any given time anyone in the team can understand it and therefore they can contribute in the context of those constraints in that particular frame effectively.

Haley: I just love the language around this type of framework. Freedom, opportunity statement, I mean it sounds like a very liberating way to approach work and it sounds like it really fosters and allows for people to think differently, think outside the box to not be afraid to go beyond maybe policies, rules or procedures. It's really exciting and it definitely makes sense for enabling brilliant people to do what they do best.
[14:00] Jon: Yeah, I agree that the language matters and I also agree that it is sort of freeing and enabling. These aren't just words right, they become the brand of how people think about their job and there's a comparable in business that I can offer, which is some of us are old enough to remember the ideas of Six Sigma being pushed through organizations and people who were trained in Six Sigma and the methods were often called black belts and that's all sorts of weird and ridiculous except that as a brand, then it enables and empowers the people who have that badge of honor to feel a certain way about the work they do. And so, the language we use to describe our processes and the methods actually do describe either a creative environment or a rule-based environment and if somebody says these are the requirements, it's as if they're saying, these are the rules and you need to behave by the rules but if somebody offers you the opportunity to frame your problem, it gives you sort of the luxury for exploration. And even if those arrive in the exact same place, the attitude that a creative person will have along the way in terms of the execution and so if I'm trudging along through this process or I'm skipping along with a smile on my face, the output is going to be dramatically different. This feels a little hippie-dippy except that I've seen it play out both ways where in a very staid conservative culture people may be working on very exciting impactful problems but there's no passion and because that sort of spark and inspiration isn't there you can see in the work product that it's just not as exciting or thrilling or appropriate or beautiful or refined as it could be.

[15:34] Haley: Yeah, definitely take some passion in really seeing that in the products and what your deliverables are. You can tell the difference when it's there and when it's not for sure, I think that we see that play out with many popular brands today and you could tell the cultures that really allow for creativity to exist and the ones that don't. I'm wondering what this has to do with values in an organization. In your opinion what are some top values that an organization needs to enhance creativity?

[16:01] Jon: I think one of the most important, we already just touched on briefly is the idea of rules. It's been said a lot that creative people break the rules, but I think that there are actually really important signals around us that you can pick up on and I'll juxtapose the way a rule-based culture presents itself to a creative culture. A rule-based culture is going to say things like these are the policies that you have to follow and one example of a policy in a rule-based organization is rules around what you can and can't do on your laptop, that it's locked down and you can't install software on your own, you have to get approval from a different organizational body and there's very very good reasons for that. Often that have to do with legal compliance or that have to do with the sort of fear or sometimes fear of spreading viruses or other sort of things that could bring down the entire network but what that company is doing by pushing that rule onto the laptops is it's saying we value the fear and risk mitigation of making sure that we're in compliance with policies or legal issues or making sure the network doesn't come down, we value that more than we value innovative thinking.

That's an overt message that's being said to people and what that then plays out into are things like compensation differences and impact differences at an executive level and so if we're saying that we value legal compliance more than we value innovation then people in legal are
going to have more of an impact and more of a say on the direction of the company than the
creative people will and sort of follows naturally. And obviously have my bias about which is
better, but I don’t think that there’s a blanket statement around that I think it really dramatically
matters in the industry. I’ll tell you that as much as I would like my bank to be creative, I’d also
like it to be locked down and very secure and safe so my data doesn’t go anywhere and that’s a
compromise as a consumer that I’m happy with them making. On the other hand I do know that
there’s a variety of banks that are blowing up the way the industry currently thinks because
they’re starting to value creative development more than they’re valuing things like legal risk and
one of the examples I give in the book is the company called Ernest, Ernest is a lender that has
raised just a ton of venture capital is doing really, really well and just a brief anecdote about
them the way that they handle their underwriting is based on your bank account and the
transactions and activity you have in it and so basically you connect your bank account analyze
your spending habits and your saving habits and they do a credit risk report based on that rather
than all of the typical things that an insurer uses. And when I talk to some of the folks that work
there in executive roles they talked about how their culture is a creative one that values people
like product managers and designers and developers more than potentially things like
underwriters or lawyers or things that would probably be valued the most at a traditional
insurance company and so they’ve been able to rethink the way that the company runs in order
to support the way that they’re innovative products work. And so these are the types of tradeoffs
that you see in a creative company being made where the prioritization around a rule free or
rule based culture really comes into clarity.

[19:01] Haley: It really sounds like the behaviors of the company instill values. Angie and I
joked about this before it's not about having a ping pong table in the break room or a keg that
says, oh where a playful culture. If you're not allowing that to show up in the employees’ work,
then it's not instilling that those are really truly values to your company.

[19:22] Jon: Yeah, I totally agree with that. I wouldn't consider any of those indicators of a
playful culture. I think they're indicators of a savvy recruitment culture or at least in San
Francisco, there are indicators of tables, you sort of have to have those things if you want to
compete at a mid-level startup or a tech company but those aren't indicators of a playful
company any more than you know, and Nerf darts is or a basketball court is. When you talk to
real creative people that's noise, yeah, their happy to have it or they're not happy to have it but
it's not nearly as important as the quality of the work that they're doing, the freedom they have to
explore dedicated time away from distractions, empowerment to make their own decisions, the
ability to learn from one another and be challenged by one another. These are the types of
things that when you talk to creative people in creative organizations that they really, really
value and in many respects, they value them more than everything else. I don't think if you
asked anybody would you want to make less money? They’re going to say yes but for a lot of
creative people, if you ask them sort of like what are your top criteria for your job money maybe
isn't in the first two or three, it's I want to get paid fairly but it's definitely not a motivator for job
selection.
Haley: I'm wondering how much trust plays a role in a creative culture because you really need a lot of freedom and like you said empowerment to do your job and really take risks so, would you say trust is one of those values that is really important to creative culture?

Jon: Yeah, I sure would. I mean in many ways if you take a risk you need to be in a trusting environment and if you think about what it means to create something from nothing, it's all about risk. You're basically saying, I'm staking a claim that the thing I'm about to make is and you can complete the sentence, that is good, is you know valuable, is innovative, is wonderful but I don't know for sure because I just made it and then to put that on display for your colleagues to sort of rip apart or judge or examine really comes from a place of vulnerability and so again like a lot of these topics you sort of have this hippie dippy thing going on in the background and I sort of have this like question mark around like is this real or am I playing the granola hippie game here a little bit but I do think that these things are real and they play out in really interesting ways during things like critique. And critique I think is one of the best sort of immediate indicators of a creative organization, is do they have a culture of people looking at each other's work and offering ways to improve it. Critique has to come in an environment of trust.

Imagine for a second, being in a sort of less traditionally considered creative organization like a business development role or something like that and putting your business development strategy up on the wall and then inviting all of your business development colleagues and your business development bosses and so on and so forth to come and tell you what's wrong with it. It's not something that a lot of people are used to, if they haven't sort of grown up in a culture like that I mean this gets driven into your head in art school and design school and even now in computer science education but for a lot of people critique is new and they don't really get it. And so, the rules around trust need to be articulated, the rules around critique need to be articulated, that's something that can't just happenstance, it actually has to be sort of structured and shepherded and I think a lot of that comes from transparency. I think a lot of it comes from overt expectation setting, a lot of it comes from being very direct in expectations and a lot of this is sort of like traditional leadership stuff, it's things that you would find in management books about how to treat your team. So, there's nothing sort of unique in my perspectives around this but I do think that that idea of critique becomes one of the most important qualities of a creative organization and something that can be really, really successfully fostered of it's done by design.

Haley: Yeah, good design definitely takes into account feedback, especially user feedback and also feedback from your teammates and in your book, you talk about this thing we call flow and how that helps with managing feedback. So, we're hoping you could talk a little bit more about flow states and kind of how the facilitate managing feedback and how they help achieve creativity?

Jon: Yeah, sure. So, I learned about Flow when I was in grad school reading some work by a fellow named Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and his work talks about and investigates what
makes creative people, creatively successful and he's not very specific or detailed about who he
means as creative. I think you know it's very broad to him that it's people who create things and
so he spends time with these people and observes them and then extracts out some principles
and some of the principles of what he calls Flow are things like dedicated amounts of time that
are uninterrupted. Things like a balance between a ability and challenge, meaning that things
are just hard enough, things like having a clearly defined goal state is often supportive and
helpful and then he describes the quality of Flows, as having things like a lack of awareness of
time, that you know you look up and suddenly hours have passed and you're like, whoa what
happened to the world around me. Sort of a lack of awareness of self that there is an auto tele
quality to the work where you're almost observing yourself doing the work and I've seen this play
out in my own work in a number of different ways.

Interestingly enough when I started teaching, I actually started experiencing Flow where I would
be lecturing or talking or working and I sort of get this sense of a meta perspective and go like, I
don't have any idea what I'm saying, and I hope that it's valuable. So, the sense of like
self-awareness disappears, and I think part of that is the self-inner critique disappears to. You
stop having that little voice in the back of your head saying like, this sucks, you suck, this isn't
going to work, this work is garbage and instead you just make the work. So, if you think about
what that requires in a corporate context first and most obviously it requires dedicated time. It
requires blocks of two or three or four hours of uninterrupted creative time and that means no
meetings and it means no conference calls, it means no mandatory training sessions all the
things that corporations like to have people do that aren't in the work and so that's a cultural shift
around the expectations of what people are doing at any given time. Another thing it requires is
work that's challenging and again there's this match between my ability and the challenge of the
project but the work needs to be challenging and therefore it can't be mindless and so that
means that people are put on projects that stress them, they're not put on a project where they
can have a sense of mastery right away and again this introduces risk because if somebody is
working on something that's directly sort of outside of their capability set, they may fail you know
almost by design they may not actually be able to achieve success there and so again that
challenge is sort of norms where you get a job based on your ability to check boxes on a
requirement list that was given by a hiring manager to a recruiter and then you do your job and
you set goals and then you meet them and then you get promoted. It's sort of like a different
way of thinking about what the expectations of you are in relationship to challenges and
succeeding or failing.

[26:07] Haley: This all seems to go back to having a trusting culture again because to reach
these states where you are essentially eliminating your fear of failure and really making yourself
vulnerable to the creative process that takes an immense amount of trust and freedom to even
get to that place and then hopefully there's no meetings and other things interrupt you from
carrying out your states of Flow but yeah it seems like this is all kind of tying back to what it
means to have a creative culture.
Jon: Yeah it really is, and I often think about the relationship I have with my students who are in a one year program and the relationship I have with corporate students that I might come in and train for a week or something like that, you know in the first couple days of all training sessions I have no ability to critique because I don't have their trust. So, if I come in the first day of class and say their work sucks and here's what you should do to improve, and this will never work, it's met with resistance and it's almost like a defense mechanism against it and so that's a totally inappropriate way for me to behave. But if you look further into the curriculum, let's say sixteen weeks into my one year program or a Wednesday or a Thursday in a one week training program, hopefully if I've done my job well I've built up enough rapport with people they trust that I know what I'm talking about, that my feedback is coming from a place of love and care and so they're willing to hear things like, that isn't very good and those are words that come out of my mouth during a critique. It's something that you're not maybe used to hearing if you're not part of this creative culture but that isn't very good and here's why, is actually a really, really important thing to help advance the quality of work. And then the next sentence would be and here's how I would improve it but again that has to come from a place of respect and that's earned over time and so you know you hear a lot about I've heard a lot about anyway and you know the new boss comes in and it's a hot shot creative director and it blows things up and runs around going into a meeting and shitting on everything there was an old joke at one of my companies is that the chief creative officer would come in and swoop and poop where he'd come into a conference, room tell everybody what he think sucked and leave and none of that works because he didn't have the trust of the people that were having their work shit on and so that has to come from a place of trust again and that you know there's no shortcut for time I suppose in that respect. And speaking of respect of the other flavor there are the other ingredient is mutual respect. It's saying things like, look you were hired because I trust you because you're good at your craft, you have potential and expertise, now let's talk about what you're doing wrong and how to improve it.

Haley: Yeah, it's definitely apparent, Angie's doing some facilitating work right now and she tells me stories about how she's going about building trust and building to a place where she can critique and give feedback but she's like, I'm not there yet, I'm getting there and here's the ways that I'm going about it it's so interesting. I mean you build your integrity with people and it should be the way that we do things right it's a human approach and humans want to be treated like humans and so I'm glad that it's becoming a more obvious that we need this. We need to be more of our human selves in the workplace and bring our whole selves to our work and that's how we are more creative and more innovative, and we do better work together that way. I wanted to talk a little bit about another subject in your book, a chaos. There was a quote in there that I just love it is very poetic it was, “chaos is the backdrop for hidden wonderment and success” and chaos is something that definitely comes with complexity thinking and complexity science. So, we're hoping it expand a little bit on the statement what is chaos have to do with creativity?

Jon: You know, I think there are almost one of the same. I think a lot of people would maybe disagree with that if they're very analytical, creative minded. There's a couple folks that I
worked with that have very sort of like perfectly organized desks with things that rectilinear angles to one another and you know it would be fun for me to come over and just move things a couple inches of see them freak out. In a way the idea of chaos I think is one of working through a problem that has no real boundaries yet, that has no real definition yet, and that has no form yet, in trying to put those things around it because people have varying opinions and all of those stages and those opinions are ill formed, which means they have the opinions they don’t necessarily have the language to express those opinions and so there’s conflict and combine that with the need or at least perceived need by the business to put more logical constraints around the process. Things like, when are things due and when can we launch things and what's going to be in that product release and sort of like all of the buttoned up things that the various aspects of the business need to do their job and when those two things collide, when this idea of ill definition, ambiguity, opinions without language to support them and the need for a structure, when all of those things land in the same pot and you stir it together you get a mess. You get things like three days before launch redoing all the work because it's only three days before the launch that everyone realized what it was they were talking about. Literally there was no clarity until that moment and so that was the first moment when things could actually be done correctly, or it comes from multiple teams building multiple things at once because when they talk to each other they're using different words in different ways and so the coordination between ideas is just lacking. It even manifests in ways like what we described with the Nerf darts and all that kind of crap, that the actual office environment almost feels like a Grand Central Station, you have people having pin ups on the wall and tearing down content and you know the sort of iconic graphic posted notes everywhere and sharpies and people writing on stuff and compared to sort of butts in seats in corner offices and quiet environment with white noise pumped in, it actually looks like chaos.

I've learned to thrive in environments like that and I think a lot of creative people have also. We come up with personal ways around the chaos, things like noise cancelling headphones and maybe I need to go work at home for half a day or day when I need to get those uninterrupted qualities of time that I talked about with the Flow. But the idea of the ambiguity of not knowing of redoing things, of proceeding without all of the data, without all of the answers of having conversations where you miss each other and sort of being okay with that and of not knowing the answer until you get there, like all of those are things that you learn as coping mechanisms to deal with the fact that creativity is a chaotic and often messy process.

[32:33] Haley: Yeah, we talked about in our design thinking series about these big messy complex problems in how things like design thinking it really helped us work through them and give us some grounding in the mess, so we can work through it and find our creativity in all the chaos. So, we wanted to just learn a little bit about fundamentally why you think creativity is important. So, how do you see creativity influencing us to be our best selves? How does it make us better as humans and why is it important?

[33:02] Jon: I think I could offer at least two perspectives on that one is, why is it important to a business? And then the other is why is it important to us? As you describe as humans to a
business to use the word literally, everything is created even things like operational efficiency or
go to market plans. All of these things have gone through a creative process, it's not typically
what we think of I think most of us if we said, oh the creative people we would imagine the
designers, the product managers, the developers but in fact everybody in the organization is
tasked with making things and increasingly jobs are about managing ambiguity jobs big and
small are about that rather than sort of following a process, you know here's a checklist just go
do it and do it over and over and over the same way. Put another way, the knowledge that you
want to call the knowledge economy, the information economy, the creative economy isn't a
road to manufacturing process, so we shouldn't treat it like one and so I think when we
introduced ways of managing creativity the business operates more efficiently believe it or not,
more effectively and it also drives things like innovation and I mean this is where new ways of
thinking about products or services or organizational systems or governance models comes
from. It's about looking at things you know in a new light or looking at things sideways or
observing connections between things that aren't normally connected and giving those things a
room to grow and so I think there are fundamental to businesses simply existing in our
economic climate today but also driving innovation and reinventing themselves in order to
remain competitive.

On a more personal note on the human side, I think that when people are creative they realize a
huge sense of personal satisfaction. I've heard a couple of models that describe dichotomy
between consumption and creativity, you can think of it as like an axis where one is on one side
and the others on the other side and I think most people go through their life around the
consumption side and they're very unbalanced. They never actually get to experience the power
of Flow, the self-satisfaction of making something, losing yourself in your work and then when
you're done looking at it and saying, I made that, it literally didn't exist a couple hours ago and
now it does, and it came from my hands and my brain. And so the idea of helping people in
mass, helping all people move away from that consumption side toward the creative side can be
really really enlightening and I think super valuable for personal growth and satisfaction.

[35:23] Haley: I’m glad you talked about the human side of things and making things is
definitely something that gives us meaning and purpose and that definitely brings us happiness
in our work lives and in our personal lives as well. Our handle on Twitter is @Let'sWorkHappy,
we talk about complex systems and systems thinking and how we apply that to our lives and
these things really come together in beautiful ways. I think creativity is definitely one of those
ways and we just navigate through life in ways that are sometimes more challenging and we
don't really have the words for it so we talk about complex systems and making connections and
making new things and what is that process look like and it's really interesting you know in going
to the creative side and what that means to be human and it's kind of brings those two worlds
together. So, thank you for explaining that and really tying it down to what it means to be
human. So, we wanted to talk a little bit about takeaways because there's many in your book
and there's simple tasks that will help readers integrate ideas from your book and since there's
so many of them, we wanted to see if you could just select one of them that you think is the
most important and share that with our listeners?
Jon: Yeah, we've talked a little bit about the idea of critique and I think if you do one thing different after reading the book or even just listening to this, I hope it would be to structure a formal critique culture. What I mean by that is an actual environment where there's dedicated time and it's a large block of it usually two three or four hours where a dedicated team often the design team or the product team or the actual scrum team comes together, looks at the work and analyzes what's bad about it and what can be improved and so this is about details, it's about honing in on specificity, it's about being very, very direct with language. I think many of us have heard that when you give feedback you're supposed to give the shit sandwich where you say something good, say something bad and then say something good and I think that's garbage. I actually think in the context of a critique it's about saying things that need to be improved almost exclusively and so what that means is being very, very direct and not worrying about hurting somebody feelings and again that you know we talked about how that has to come from a place of trust. You can't just waltz into a meeting where you don't know anybody and offer that which is why it has to come from the dedicated scene but you know if you can establish a regular cadence of critique, if you happen to be in a leadership role every two weeks at one o'clock on a Friday we're going to have a critique and it's going to be three hours and at the end we're all going to go to a bar like that has a huge, huge value. It's something that people learn to look forward to, it's something they prepare for, it's something they bring to work that they're excited about work shopping through and so that becomes part of their culture and it seeps into other aspects of the work that's done too. So, what I've seen where I've instilled this is that once you have a formal critique culture you start to see informal critiques happening much more frequently, where people may just grab a group of people walk over to a white board and start to have those same direct conversations around what improvements need to be made without actual prompting from leadership in any way.

Haley: This made me think about just recruiting talent and if you really need to look for a certain kind of person, when you have a creative culture and if that's even possible because I know some people might be better than others in a critique culture or do you think that anyone could base on the constructs of the culture and the values there if they could integrate into the culture if it takes a certain kind of person?

Jon: You know I think a lot about that to particularly when I'm obviously in a hiring role. I'm sort of two minds of that there are definitely some people that are much more comfortable receiving criticism of their work and sort of analyzing it intellectually, considering it and then just because you hear it doesn't mean you have to do it and so those people are very open to sort of considering things and then saying, no actually that wasn't constructive criticism, I'm going to ignore that and you know if you can suss that out in an interview that's fantastic. But I have found that some of the most creative, exciting, innovative people that I've hired actually have no real social skills to speak of at all and that's certainly what taking criticism involves is being sort of self-aware and communally aware. I hired somebody at Frog who among other things would comment at eleven thirty, eat only candy and sleep under her desk but she made fantastic design work and so you know she could sit in a critique and it wasn't like she would get upset.
and walk out or anything but it had a different vibe to it than I think somebody who is much more sort of socially aware and in both context I want both of those people on my team. So, I don't know if it's something that can be recruited for I do think it's something that can be taught and I mean we teach it at my school, you know the first critique we have everybody puts up their work and then nobody says anything or everybody says you know I really like it and then we do the well, why do you like it and they offer some sort of half assed response and then we sort of critique the critique. Often, I'll film them and walk through the critique itself and say, alright when you said you liked it what value to that provide to the person? Not much. What would be a better way for you to have delivered that feedback, you to point out something that you like but then juxtapose it with something you don't and then move away from language like, I like it and I don't like it and actually talk about it in the language that we've used on this call here of constraints and framing and value and start to hone in on more constructive ways of saying, this needs to be changed. So, long way around, I don't think you can recruit for it as much as you can teach it.

Haley: I'm so glad I asked you that it's an interesting discussion just because I know that recruiting methods based on values, that happens a lot and I'm sure if it was really that side of things or the other side is it about the companies shifting their culture and really instilling values in those showing up in behaviors, you know which side of things really matters more and I think you've got such a well-rounded background to really speak to that. So, I'm glad I asked you that question and I know we've really picked your brain a lot about creativity and values in this really rich discussion, so just in wrapping up I'm wondering if there's anything we missed in our conversation is there any future projects in the works for you personally?

Jon: Yeah, I've enjoyed our conversation as well. I'm actually struck with inspiration, so I'm working on yet another book this one's about teaching but beyond that I'm running modest studio along with three of my partners and we're having a really sort of fun but also informative time building out a company from scratch so that's been exciting and in terms of what's next for me I want to carry these ideas forward with as many people as I can because I think they're valuable and they're ideas that I wish that I had when I was starting to be in a leadership role and I wish somebody had held me with and so sort of as a parting self-promotive advertising I'd love for you to go check out and buy the book Creative Clarity on Amazon but more importantly than that I'd like you to tweet at me @JKolko and let me know what you think of it. I'm not going to get rich off your purchase on Amazon, but I would get more sort of emotionally rich on understanding how these ideas resonate as you try to include these into your companies.

Haley: I love that you're asking for critique on your book and definitely living the values that you talk about in your creative culture and it's magical all the stuff that you do you really live it, you don't just talk about it and I think that's really where the inspiration and you really put your money where your mouth is, I should say. So, how can our listeners find you other than the Twitter that you just gave out and where can I listeners find your books?

Jon: You can check out some of the things I've written and see what I'm up to at my website JonKolko.com. You could check out my consultancy, it's called Modernist Studio and

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where at themoderniststudio.com and in terms of the book right now only on Amazon. I can tell all sorts of quick stories about what it's like to sell your books on Amazon and the trials and tribulations of that but for the time being that's our sole distribution center. If you want me to email you a copy of the PDF generally I'm okay doing that too, although I'd much rather you obviously purchase it and write a glowing review of it on Amazon, so those are ways you can get in touch with me and learn a little bit more about my writing and my work.

[43:17] Haley: Great thank you so much Jon. It's been such a fun and enlightening conversation, I'm so glad you could join us back on the show for another one of our amazing talks.

[43:25] Jon: Thanks so much for having me again, I really appreciate it.


[Outro Music]

[44:25] End

*DISCLAIMER: Humans transcribed this content. Please keep in mind, there could be some human error.*